

GIBSONVILLE HEALTHY FOREST RESTORATION PROJECT

Feather River Ranger District, Plumas National Forest

Minerals

Introduction

There are approximately 13 active mining claims in area of the Gibsonville Healthy Forest Restoration Project (the Gibsonville Project) area¹ (see Appendix A- Mining Claims Potentially Affected). The Feather River Ranger District currently administers one Notice of Intent for active mining claims in the Project area. There is currently one expired Plan of Operations (Plan) that is being renewed. Many claims are not currently being worked but maintain an active filing with the Bureau of Land Management. Inspections of the claims in 2015 found minimal use on the remainder of the claims.

This area has a long history of mining and there are some abandoned mines in and near the Project area. However an inventory of the sites has not yet been completed. Some of these abandoned mines may be identified for closure in the future.

Mineral Materials (“common variety” minerals) may be disposed of at the discretion of the District Ranger. There are currently no active permitted Mineral Materials sites within the Project area.

This minerals analysis includes the effects of the Gibsonville Project on the mining related activities of mine claimants and operators, within the Project boundary. The short term and long term effects, including beneficial effects, are included in this analysis. Forest Service initiated abandoned mine closure projects are included as part of the cumulative effects analysis.

Analysis Framework: Statute, Regulatory Environment, Forest Plan and Other Direction

Regulatory Environment

Federal Laws

Management of mining operations on the Plumas National Forest falls under several regulatory authorities. The Mining Law of 1872 established the category of locatable minerals. It authorized placer and lode mining claims, mill site claims and tunnel site claims and modified the ability for patenting upon proven discovery. It also required at least \$100 worth of work on each claim annually in order to maintain a possessory title.

The Forest Service Organic Administration Act of 1897 gave the Forest Reserves the basic authority to regulate surface uses, including mining.

Other regulatory Acts which affect minerals administration on the Forest include the 1947 Materials Act, the 1955 Multiple Use Mining Act (Surface Use Act, or PL-167), and the Clean Water Act, Section 401. Mining claims located prior to 1955, when valid existing rights were asserted (“stipulated surface rights”), have some rights regarding how the Forest Service manages and disposes of the timber. No claims within the analysis area were located prior to 1955.

Daily operations are regulated under Federal mining law found in 36 CFR 228, Subpart A for Locatables, and Subpart C for Mineral Materials.

¹ <http://www.blm.gov/lr2000/>

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State Laws

The California Surface Mining and Reclamation Act of 1975 (SMARA) requires that anyone, including government agencies, engaged in surface mining operations in California (including those on federally managed lands) which disturb more than one acre or remove more than 1,000 cubic yards of material must submit and be subject to a Reclamation Plan. This includes, but is not limited to: prospecting and exploratory activities, dredging and quarrying, streambed skimming, borrow pitting, and the stockpiling of mined materials.

Mining operators are responsible for the preparation and submission of reclamation plans and financial assurances for reclamation to the lead agency. Annual reporting to both the State and the lead agency on the status of mining and reclamation activities, annual updates of financial assurances, and annual inspections (to be conducted under the auspices of the lead agency), are required. Following completion of mining activities, and in accordance with the approved reclamation plan and relevant permit conditions, mining operators return mined lands to a second, productive use. Examples of post-mining uses may include, but are not limited to, open space, wildlife habitat, agricultural lands, grazing, park lands, and preparing the land for industrial or commercial uses².

Forest Plan

Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment Final Supplemental EIS (2004)

The Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (2004) expands upon direction outlined in the Forest Plan and further delineates standards and guidelines for mining with requirements for reclamation, inspections and monitoring. These guidelines ensure that plans of operation, reclamation plans and reclamation bonds fully address all costs of reclamation and that reclamation is accomplished in a timely manner; ensure that mine operators and owners limit new road construction, decommission unnecessary roads and maintain needed roads consistent with Forest Service policy; require inspections and monitoring on a regular basis consistent with potential severity of mining related impacts; and limit clearing of trees and other vegetation to the minimum necessary for operations (pages 58-59).

Forest Plan Direction

The 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (commonly referred to as the “Forest Plan”), as amended by the 2004 SNFPA Final Supplemental EIS Record of Decision, guides the proposed action and alternatives. Forest wide Standards and guidelines for minerals and geology are outlined in the Forest Plan and help move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan. General direction is to “Encourage mineral and materials development that reasonably protects surface resources, and provides for land reclamation; maintain and update a materials source inventory for Forest uses; recommend withdrawal from mineral entry areas valued for other purposes; protect public safety and Forest resources from slope failure; and prevent loss of groundwater quality and quantity”, Chapter 4, Forest Wide Standards and Guidelines (page 4-46 to 4-49).

² <http://www.consrv.ca.gov/omr/smara>

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Effects Analysis Methodology

Specific Assumptions

One Plan of Operations has been submitted and is currently being evaluated for a continuing mining operation within the Project area. One Notice of Intent has been recently submitted. However, this is not an indicator of amount of mining activity in the Analysis area. Under Forest Service mining regulations found at 36 CFR 228.4, mining operations that are not likely to cause a significant disturbance of surface resources may precede without any notice to the Forest Service. Inspections of the claims in the Analysis area in 2015 found minor activity on most of them. Therefore, it can be assumed that there is some level of mining operations occurring on many of the claims within the Analysis area.

No Mineral Material permits have been issued or requested within the Analysis area.

Forest Service abandoned mine lands (AML) reclamation projects are implemented as funding becomes available. A few reclamation projects have been completed for abandoned mines within the Analysis area. It is possible that more AML sites will be identified and subsequently reclaimed within the next 10 years.

Specific Methodology

In order to understand the contribution of past actions to the cumulative effects of the proposed action and alternatives, this analysis relies on current environmental conditions as a proxy for the impacts of past actions. This is because existing conditions reflect the aggregate impact of all prior human actions and natural events that have affected the environment and might contribute to cumulative effects.

This cumulative effects analysis does not attempt to quantify the effects of past human actions by adding up all prior actions on an action-by-action basis. There are several reasons for not taking this approach. First, a catalog and analysis of all past actions would be impractical to compile and unduly costly to obtain. Current conditions have been impacted by innumerable actions over the last century (and beyond), and trying to isolate the individual actions that continue to have residual impacts would be nearly impossible. Second, providing the details of past actions on an individual basis would not be useful to predict the cumulative effects of the proposed action or alternatives. In fact, focusing on individual actions would be less accurate than looking at existing conditions, because there is limited information on the environmental impacts of individual past actions, and one cannot reasonably identify each and every action over the last century that has contributed to current conditions. Additionally, focusing on the impacts of past human actions risks ignoring the important residual effects of past natural events, which may contribute to cumulative effects just as much as human actions. By looking at current conditions, we are sure to capture all the residual effects of past human actions and natural events, regardless of which particular action or event contributed those effects. Finally, the Council on Environmental Quality issued an interpretive memorandum on June 24, 2005 regarding analysis of past actions, which states, "agencies can conduct an adequate cumulative effects analysis by focusing on the current aggregate effects of past actions without delving into the historical details of individual past actions."

Scope of the Analysis

Geographic Analysis Area: The Project area encompasses approximately 1200 acres on the Feather River Ranger District. The geographic boundary for the Minerals Effects Analysis is the project area plus the adjacent area. The rationale for this analysis area is that mining claims do not stop at treatment

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boundaries and the effects of traffic, heavy equipment and smoke would occur outside the Project area boundaries.

Timeframe of Analysis: In the analysis of the Project, current ongoing mining projects and reasonably foreseeable actions were considered. The existing condition encompasses the past history of the area including a long term use of the land for mining purposes. The timeframe that these cumulative effects would impact mining is during the Project and for 10 years beyond its completion. During the Project there will be disturbance from logging, hand piling, masticating, and burning.

Analysis Methodology

Mining claim data and claim locations were acquired through the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) LR2000 database³ in October 2015 and April, 2016. Information from these sources was cross referenced with the Gibsonville Project map to determine areas of impact.

Affected Environment

The Analysis area has experienced considerable mining over the last century, and some gold mining and exploration continue today. There are approximately 13 active mining claims in the Analysis area: most of these are placer claims, including underground placers. Most claims are worked by small time operators who mine for gold utilizing hand tools, metal detectors, gold pans and sluice boxes. Historically, many claims have been worked with suction dredges; however, there is currently a moratorium on suction dredging in the state of California.

The Feather River Ranger District is currently evaluating one Notice of Intent (NoI), for multiple claims, for proposed mineral exploration activities in the Analysis area. The results of this exploration project could be further exploration and development of the mining claims.

One operation has been under a Plan of Operations for many years. A new Plan is currently being processed for this underground placer mining. This operation includes the use of the existing historical cabin and storage of equipment on the site. This mine site is in treatment unit #612.

Historic underground mining created deep horizontal adits and vertical mine shafts. An inventory of these abandoned mine sites has not been completed in the Analysis area. However, several of the known abandoned mines have already been closed. There are a few more known abandoned mines just outside the Analysis area and it is assumed there may be even more abandoned mines within the Analysis area. Where these abandoned mines do exist, terrain, ground cover, and a lack of surrounding structures make many of these mine shafts difficult to see. Because the open shafts are not readily visible, they pose a direct hazard to Forest visitors and workers.

Environmental Consequences

Proposed Action and Alternative: California Spotted Owl Interim Recommendations for Management

Direct and Indirect Effects (Proposed Action & Alternative)

With the action alternatives, the main impacts to mining operations and operators will be smoke, claim access routes that will be use as haul routes, and the potential that the Project surface activities will occur in the same area and same time as a mining operation. These affects would be of short duration and can

³ <http://www.blm.gov/lr2000/>

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be minimized by coordination with the mining claimants, planning project activities to have the least affect on the mining operations.

The Project includes underburning in certain areas and pile burning in others. The smoke from burning would have a temporary impact on air quality in the area. Most mining operations take place during the summer months, typically June through mid-October. Burning that occurs outside this typical mining season would have less of an impact on claimants.

There are proposed temp roads on two mining claims, near proposed drill locations. Haul roads cross all the claims. The main haul roads are the Quincy- La Porte road, the Gibsonville road (County Road 900), and Forest road 22N01X. (See Appendix A) Coordinating project activities with the mining operators will reduce road use conflicts. Road maintenance and improvements undertaken during the project will benefit mining claimants by improving claim access.

The indirect effects of all action alternatives within the area boundary would be to reduce fuel loading and improve access to the surface. This would have a beneficial effect for mining claimants as it would thereby improve access to subsurface resources. There would be a beneficial effect of reducing the risk of wildfire and aesthetically cleaning up the stands of trees. Road maintenance would also improve mining access. There may be some indirect effects on mining operators as there would be with any forest visitor due to heavy equipment and haul traffic in the area during the life of the project.

The project activities would reduce ground fuels and thin trees, making it easier to locate abandoned mines and accomplish closure work.

Cumulative Effects (Both Alternatives)

In the analysis, cumulative effects of past actions, the action alternatives, current ongoing actions and reasonably foreseeable actions were considered. The existing condition encompasses the past history of the area including mining throughout the Analysis area. Future fuels reduction projects would serve to reduce hazardous fuel conditions that could threaten mining areas, historic structures and equipment. Future larger scale mining operations would include mitigations for environmental protection as well as reclamation plans. Each proposal would include a separate environmental analysis. Reasonably foreseeable future projects (AML projects) that would close or fence off abandoned mine shafts would help reduce safety risks to Forest visitors and workers. Overall, there will be no significant cumulative effects from implementation of the action alternatives.

REFERENCES

Bureau of Land Management Land & Mineral Legacy Rehost 2000 System (LR2000)
<http://www.blm.gov/lr2000/>